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ABSTRACT

This paper describes one vision of how to improve urban education, highlighting the Newark, New Jersey, public schools. It discusses the importance of encouraging all students to "reach for the stars" in education and describes the government's role in perpetuating inequitable circumstances. It highlights the importance of emphasizing outcomes first and bureaucracies and systems last, noting that it is time to start giving citizens more control and authority over their own lives. The paper suggests that in order to break the cycle of poverty within inner cities, it is necessary to emphasize education. Being outcome-focused involves considering such options as charter schools, contract schools, and educational vouchers. One significant problem in urban education is that parents are convinced that their children cannot succeed in public schools. While wealthy people have considerable educational choice, the poorest, most vulnerable people are often allowed no choice. There is a status quo in urban education that benefits many people, and it is necessary to explore methods of change that are effective against this status quo. Urban parents are more interested in their children's education than the public perceives, and they need support in their efforts to improve their children's education. (SM)

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CENTER FOR CIVIC INNOVATION
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School Choice and Government Reform: Pillars of an Urban Renaissance

Councilman Cory A. Booker

Cory Booker is a city councilman in Newark, New Jersey. This is an edited version of remarks he delivered at a Manhattan Institute luncheon in New York City on September 20, 2000.

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Before I went overseas to study at Oxford, my grandmother pulled me aside and said, "Boy, just remember, you can learn more from a woman on the sixth floor of the projects than you can ever learn from one of these fancy professors in one of these fancy universities."

And, in truth, I think I have learned my most valuable lessons from some of the humblest people I've met on my journey. One of these people is a young man named Robert.

Robert was a young boy, about six years old, who was involved in an after-school program I worked on in East Palo Alto. Robert was one of the cutest kids you will ever see. He was a cross between Gary Coleman and Webster.

On the last day of my summer project, I told this group of children, ages six to about 12, that I wanted to leave them with a message. I was going to do an exercise. The exercise I often do is to have the children stand up and raise their hands as high as they can. Then I tell the children after they raise their hands as high as they can, "Now, raise them three inches higher." Inevitably the children realize they can step on their tippy-toes. Sometimes a child is creative and steps on a chair. Then I leave them with the message that you can always do a little more. You can always do a little better. You can always reach three inches higher.

This time I said to the children, "All right. I want everybody on the count of three to raise your hands as high as you can."

If anyone knows East Palo Alto, they know that it is a tough town. These 12-year-olds, 11-year-olds, and 10-year-olds looked at me like I was crazy. They said, "I don't want to do that. That's stupid, man. Shoot, I can't do that."

Not being a great child psychologist, I resorted to a very easy way of getting children to do what you want them to do. I reached in my pocket, and I pulled out $5. I intended to bribe them. I said, "$5 to the kid that can raise his hand the highest." Immediately the kids' hands shot up. They were comparing themselves to each other.

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All of a sudden I looked to my left, and I saw young Robert there, the shortest of the lot, the youngest of the lot, with his arms crossed, his face in a pout, looking down. "And the sad thing," I thought, "is that this is the last child in this program that I would ever want to feel defeated." I was about to go over and talk to him when he turned around and ran out.

I knew Robert came from a really tough family. He never knew his father. His mother was, unfortunately, caught in a terrible drug addiction such that I would often have to go to her home and pick him up and bring him to the program. I chased after him with this nightmare in my mind that he was running home or running away. I grabbed him from behind and turned him around. I said, "Robert, where are you going?"

You can always do a little better. You can always reach three inches higher.

Robert looked at me really hard for a second and then looked over at the other kids straining their arms to see who could raise his hand the highest. He looked back at me and said, with a wisdom that betrayed his age, "Cory, you said you'd give $5 to the child that can raise his hand the highest, right?"

I said, "Yes, Robert."

He said, "Cory, I know a way to get to the roof."

I gave Robert the $5.

I am a very blessed individual. I feel blessed because I have two parents who never let me forget who I was or where I am from. My parents, in fact, are two of the greatest patriots I know because they really believe in this country. They believe in its promise and they believe in its hope, and they still hold dear its dream.

My parents often tell me stories about my great-grandfather's father, who was born a slave and literally bled that Southern soil red, about how their peers in college and their co-conspirators sat in, marched, and even stood before a fire hose. They encouraged me to believe that I am part of a historical struggle in this nation to make true its bold and great promise.

But they also told me that that promise and that dream have costs and must come with certain sacrifices. As a young man, when I got to be 18 years old and began to pursue my education, I remembered what my parents told me: To he whom much is given, much is expected.

So I rolled up my sleeves and humbled myself in the best way I knew how. I worked as a tutor, as a mentor, as a big brother, as a coach, and eventually as a director of a non-profit and as a lawyer at New Haven, a young man working in different legal aid programs. But by the time I reached the end of my legal career, in fact before I graduated, I had enough of this alleged humility and I was ready to take on a great audacity.

Like Patton says, "L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace." Audacity, audacity, always audacity.

I decided that I was going to move onto the worst street I could find in the region and begin my work, in hopes that I could not just help one person, but really change a community.

The street I found ironically was named Martin Luther King Boulevard in Newark. It was so far away from King's dream. Truly, it was a liv-

ing nightmare. First and foremost, there was pharmaceutical trade on that street that could put Merck and Johnson & Johnson to shame. It was 24 hours, three shifts a day.

In the short time I was there, I came to understand that the drug dealers had an incredible trade that was punctuated with horrific scenes of violence. During the first month that I lived on that street, there was a shooting. A woman was found bludgeoned to death on the street corner when I woke up one morning. I constantly whispered reminders to myself as I would walk down the streets and the young men would yell out, "Five-oh, five-oh, five-oh," which meant that a police officer was approaching.

Eventually I came into a situation where I had my life threatened by one of these drug dealers. I realized that this environment was far away from that dream and that hope and that promise my parents still talked about so boldly as I was growing up.

Worse, there was a slum on the corner. In fact, there was about three different slums controlled by some very nefarious individuals who pocketed many, many millions of dollars from federal programs and put little into the building. Even worse than that, I started to have a lot of aggression and animosity towards the city because it was doing nothing about one of the boldest drug trades I had ever seen and nothing about code violations that were so obvious that you could walk into people's homes and look at holes through their floors. No one seemed to be doing anything about it.

I had senior citizens complain to me about having to walk up 16 flights of stairs with groceries because elevators worked intermittently. I had people in the wintertime complain to me because they would go days without hot water or heat. This was an urban nightmare.

It was in the midst of all this, of working with different residents, that I began to become very political. The government that I had heard was a force for good in so many ways I began to see in many ways as a force that, at best, tolerated such circumstances and, at worst, was complicit and active in them. So I began to get involved in the political process.

Together with several tenant leaders and other people, we decided that we would run a candidate for City Hall. Eventually, unable to find somebody that had the fiscal resources or the ability to withstand the recriminations of the city, people turned their attention to me as their candidate. And I ran.

The government that I had heard was a force for good in so many ways I began to see in many ways as a force that, at best, tolerated such circumstances and, at worst, was complicit and active in them.

I ran for office in an environment that was so hostile. I had windows on my cars smashed, I had threats to my person, there was literature spread about me throughout the city that I was a "tool of the Jews," that I was a CIA plant in the city, that I was a KKK member—all wonderful, creative things. My opponent literally would refer to me in debates, and I used to joke about this, as the "faggot white boy running against him."

I would turn to my neighbor and wonder, "Is there a sin in being either?" It is interesting to me that even with all this hostility, we were able to get elected. We won a seat simply because we

took the time to knock on about 40,000 doors and enter into the city.

Interestingly enough, when I got into the city a lot of my fears and worries and concerns about the government were confirmed. In many ways we felt as if we had walked into the Augean stables. But, sadly, I was no Hercules.

The problems I began to see stemmed from a number of different places. First and foremost, in the city of Newark, as in many urban cities, I found out there is an oligarchy of power in control. In fact, most of the people on the City Council held two or three government jobs. The mayor of the city of Newark is also a state senator. One councilperson is also a state assemblyperson. Another city councilperson is a freeholder as well. One city councilperson has a county job in addition to her City Council job. Most of the people around the City Council table earn well over six figures. The mayor is the highest paid politician in the state of New Jersey, making over $200,000 a year. These people are incredible elites in a city where the median income is still about $9,500.

We must be loyal to outcomes first and bureaucracies and systems last.

We also saw that there were incredibly perverse incentives pervading City Hall, where actually getting your job done was not the biggest incentive. It was more about doing everything necessary to stay in power. That brings me to the other problem I saw: there was absolutely no accountability whatsoever for officials. I would sit through budget hearings, where I would turn to the clerk's aide in disbelief when I found out that our number one job as in the City Council was to oversee the budget while only two or three council people out of nine showed up for budget hearings.

I began to feel that the main theme of City Council life was really to do the following things: First, it was, by every means necessary, protect your turf. Second, resist change. Third, expand one's sphere of control, always hoping to control more and more resources and authority. Fourth, enlarge the number of subordinates underneath you because having subordinates means having power, having election workers, and keeping yourself in office. Next, protect programs and projects regardless of whether they are effective or not. Finally, maintain the ability to distribute the greatest amounts of wealth from taxpayer to people and organizations of your own choosing.

The results of these actions provide examples of bad government. They are funny examples if you look at them from inside of City Hall, but they are tragic examples when you get outside of City Hall. I have now moved into the housing projects mentioned above, and I see the examples of bad government in my reality.

Look around the corner from outside of my house. From my window I can see the last of the high-rise housing projects in the city of Newark, controlled by the Housing Authority, one of the larger bureaucracies in the city. The Housing Authority in Newark is notorious. But if you examine other housing authorities around the state, it is not alone.

Buzz Bissinger describes the housing authority in a great book about Philadelphia called *A Prayer for the City*. I felt as if he were writing about my own housing authority. He talks about "a culture of dependency similar to a protection racket in which taxpayers are constantly being asked

to subsidize an elite group of monopolistic institutions that are too often incompetent, above accountability, and have as their primary success employment and patronage mills for politicians."

This is an endemic reality within the city of Newark. As my popularity has grown, I have encountered more and more examples of situations that just astonish me. A very bigwig official in the county of Essex sat down with me and encouraged me to think about running for mayor or for county executive in the next election cycle. For 30 minutes of the conversation, I sat there and listened to this man debate with himself back and forth about which job is the better job, based upon which job has more patronage and which job has more people under authority. It was not about what ideas you might have to bring to the job; it was not about what kind of character or ethics you might bring to the position.

This leads me to consider what we really need. I call it the ABCs of government. Ground floor: what you need if you are going to be effective, especially in changing the kind of culture that we have in Newark politics.

First we need accountability. I divide accountability into three components. First of all, it means having standards that you can measure. It is most important to actually have consequences—real, tangible consequences—if those standards are not met.

The second part of the ABCs of politics is B, for bureaucracies last. We now have a system in government where people are more loyal to the bureaucracy than they are to the outcome. We must be loyal to outcomes first and bureaucracies and systems last. If you are outcomes-focused, you start to realize often that you don't need these controlling and all-consuming bureaucracies.

The C stands for citizenship. What we really need to start doing in inner cities, which I discuss in churches and with tenant groups, is empowering citizens. But you empower citizens by asking more from them, not less.

We need to start asking more from our citizens and start making our citizens more responsible and giving them more control and authority over their own lives.

I believe this is achievable. I believe that because there is a good number of mayors in cities all around America. In fact, I think there is a growing Zeitgeist in this nation of mayors who are ready and working and in many ways trying to change the status quo—in a sense, to change the old paradigm.

If we are ever going to break the cycle of poverty within inner cities, we have to focus on education.

The old paradigm was an entitlement paradigm, in which large big city mayors controlled race-based machines. What that was really about was capturing big entitlements from the state and federal governments and divvying them up among their cronies or among the people within their organizations to protect and preserve their organizations. It was about distributing wealth.

The new paradigm is about quick thinkers, people who are trying to make their governments engines of economic opportunity and judge them not by how many jobs they can provide but by how much wealth they can create and how efficiently they can deliver services within their own city.

This is where America as a whole is going, both the private sector and the public sector.

The author Thomas Friedman says that this is no longer a society where big beats small. Instead, it is a society where fast beats slow. The big bureaucracies and the big governments that we used to think worked, especially in inner cities, do not necessarily achieve the goals and the ends that we all desire.

If we are ever going to break the cycle of poverty within inner cities, we have to focus on education. I believe that the educational bureaucracies that now exist have to be held up to that same guise of the ABCs of what makes good government work.

Being outcome-focused started to change my view in favor of options like charter schools, contract schools and, yes, vouchers.

I have always been, up until maybe four or five years ago, a strong advocate for the old-fashioned way of educating children. I supported public schools only. Even charter schools made me a little uncomfortable when I first heard about them.

But after four or five years of working in inner city Newark, I began to rethink my situation, rethink my philosophy, rethink my views on public education, simply because of the realities I saw around me. Being outcome-focused started to change my view in favor of options like charter schools, contract schools and, yes, vouchers.

I doggedly worked within the system when I first got to Martin Luther King Boulevard. In fact, several other people along that block and I were able to get an incredible public/private partnership with a local school. Now it is really a community school. It's vibrant. Things are happening there. But the failure rates still exist. They may have a health center that is now open until late in the evening, but when it comes to what is happening in the classroom children are still failing.

If you look at the entire school system in Newark, you have to find it repugnant. The graduation rate in public high schools is down to 45 percent. Over 75 percent of eighth graders fail math proficiency tests, and nearly 50 percent fail in the language arts. And again, too many grade schools, especially in the area I represent which is the poorest ward in the city, have failure rates that range upwards into the 90th percentile.

Excuses for why they are failing are abundant. It is their environment, it is the family, it is a school system without enough money. But these excuses do not hold up under further examination.

In Newark, per capita expenditure is about $10,000, over $10,000 if we include capital costs. I try to speak in one public school a week, talk to teachers, work with them. I found some creative ways to help them. But before I go into a classroom, I will always ask the teacher, "What can I do for you?" And inevitably, he or she always says, "Can you help me get some books? Can you help me get some school supplies?"

This summer I parked my mobile home in the neighborhood right down the street from a school. I saw some children carrying flyers home and stopped them to look at the flyers. They were having a penny drive. I thought that this was a wonderful thing that they were

doing, and I was thinking that they were planning to use the money for a field trip or to buy something for the school. When I looked closer at the flyer, I saw that the proceeds from the second half of that penny drive were going to be used to buy pencils and pens and basic school supplies. Poor children had to go home and scrape together pennies for school supplies when there is a $10,000 per people expenditure. Teachers tell me that that money never reaches them so that they can buy their supplies.

I see also what is happening in other places in Newark. Newark has some of the best schools in this country, but they happen to be private schools and charter schools. One example is St. Benedict's, one of the best schools in the region. In fact, people from the suburbs often try to send their kids into the city to St. Benedict's because it has such a draw for education. It is a Catholic school with 530 students in grades seven to 12. The tuition for the middle school is about $3,300, and the tuition for high school is about $5,400. The average subsidy per student is $3,200. The majority of the students are on financial aid. But the overwhelming majority succeeds and goes on to four-year colleges.

Another example is the Chad School, an Afrocentric school with about 300 students. The majority of the students come from the lowest income families in the city, and the average cost per child is $3,300. None of the Chad students pay full price, and the average subsidy is about $2,100. The Chad School boasts that for the last five years 100 percent of its graduates go on to four-year colleges.

When you walk into these schools, you can feel the difference. You can sense the energy. You can see the discipline. You walk into classrooms and can witness some of the people that live on my block, on Martin Luther King Boulevard, in the projects, succeeding at rates much higher than they were when they attended the public schools.

These are not the only schools. There is a charter school that is succeeding incredibly well. But there are 150 children enrolled in that school, and the waiting list is now approaching 1,000.

[Parents] are convinced, because of great evidence, that their child cannot succeed in the public school system. This is a problem.

This is one of the biggest issues that has compelled me to start to re-examine how our public dollars are used for educating children. But even more poignant examples are the following: Many of the poorest parents, mostly single mothers, especially during the summer months, approach me and beg me to help them find available scholarships that might liberate their children from failing public schools, public schools that have decade-long records of failures. I sit with parents and listen to their stories that the only hope for their children and their families' future is a good education for their child. They are convinced, because of great evidence, that their child cannot succeed in the public school system. This is a problem.

The ABCs of government accountability with real consequences when standards are not met, without preference of bureaucracies over outcomes or children, and with citizen empowerment are not being achieved right now in the present system in Newark, New Jersey.

When I start discuss vouchers with people within the city of Newark and elsewhere, I often hear people say, "Well, inner city parents can't be responsible for making these kind of choices." They always tell stories of single mothers who are too busy or not educated enough to make choices.

I always respond to that, and I challenge it. I challenge anybody to come into my city and walk with me and simply talk to these mothers. You will see that they care more about the education of their children and are more informed than suburban soccer moms are in the towns where I grew up. They know what it is going to take to help their children achieve the American dream. They believe in it, and they still hold onto it.

Public education is the use of public dollars to educate our children at the schools that are best equipped to do so—public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, Baptist schools, Jewish schools, or other innovations in education.

There are people in this country that have choices. I grew up with those people. I was one of those people. I went to college with those people. In fact, they dominated places like Stanford and Yale. Those are people with wealth and resources. They have vouchers because they have the power to choose schools for their children.

Wealthy people seem to have that choice. We say to the poorest, most vulnerable Americans that they cannot choose. We as a government force them into failing institutions. I hear some of our largest national politicians say that we are going to bleed the public schools if we allow the children to come in and kill public education if we allow children out.

I disagree. Al Gore has said that if his child was in a failing Washington, D.C. public school he would be in favor of vouchers as well. But these people would never ever send their children into public education, but they are going to tell my friends in the central ward of Newark that their children have to go there.

We need to return to redefining education as a whole. The implementation of vouchers is not a panacea. If it is used as a guise for disinvesting in education as a whole, then I will never be in favor of it. But I will support it if it is part of a larger system of education for our children. I define public education not as a publicly guaranteed space and a publicly run, publicly funded building where our children are sent based on their ZIP code.

Public education is the use of public dollars to educate our children at the schools that are best equipped to do so—public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, Baptist schools, Jewish schools, or other innovations in education. That is where public dollars should go.

Ultimately, the battle over education is not completely ideological. It is not about who has the best plan, who has the best program. If it were as simple as that, we would have more experimentation and more innovations in education. I return to the same lesson that I learned when I declared my candidacy for City Council in 1998. The forces that rose up against me were not looking for good government. They were looking to protect, first and foremost, a system. These forces were organized, were relentless, and were well financed.

When it comes to education in a place like the city of Newark—indeed, when it comes to change as a whole—you are working against

forces that benefit so much from the status quo that they are not interested in experimentation or exploring different answers. They are interested in defending their power, defending their turf, defending their bureaucracies, defending their patronage. The reality is so true in New Jersey, and especially so true in Newark, where so many people have padded their pockets and protected the great deals they had going on based upon the status quo.

We simply have to begin to explore change and begin to do the hard work it takes to make change. As Frederick Douglass says, "Power concedes nothing without force."

I had a lot of success last summer when I moved into a housing project and set up a tent in one of the most violent housing projects. I was able to do many positive things in this community just by having a physical presence there.

Moving into a mobile home this summer, fueled with that same audacity that I mentioned before, I believed that my friends and I would move around in the worst drug corners in the city and try to make change.

It has been a sobering summer. Events I have witnessed this summer have sent chills to my bones. I have seen the shootings, heard the gunshots, talked to thousands of families this summer, and listened to their stories of growing up in their neighborhoods.

Through this experience, I became acquainted with a woman named Ms. Cooper. The night before I moved into a set of projects called Little Bricks, her daughter was shot in a crossfire. In Little Bricks there are monuments to the dead—a sweatshirt tied around a pole for a 14-year-old boy that was shot, some graffiti on a wall where another teenager was shot and killed. Some decaying dried flowers lay by a large rock that sits in the corner of the playground, another monument to another young person who has passed away.

I talked to Ms. Cooper for a while about her daughter, and her daughter finally came over and shyly lifted her shirt to show me where the bullet had entered and exited her stomach. As I sat there and talked to her and listened to her determination to change in her community, never once did she mention that she was going to move away or that she had to get her daughter out of this environment. She talked to me about fighting.

We can make a change in these inner cities, and not just a three-inch change. We can find a way to get to the roof.

The night that I spoke to her, she had a clipboard in hand and she was collecting petitions to try to get more police presence because, indeed, the drug dealers that were involved in the shooting are still dealing drugs outside of her window. The young man who actually did the shooting is still at large. Her daughter, an incredible, resilient young lady, is still afraid to even walk outside of her house and face these men who were involved in damaging her so badly.

There is a 15-year-old girl who goes to a high school and who should get a medal just for showing up at that school. She attends a high school where eight out of the 10 people that graduate from that high school are deemed by the state as incompetent or as unable to read at their reading level.

This is the real tragedy. But the real inspiration in this story is Ms. Cooper's willingness

to continue fighting. The great Langston Hughes wrote a wonderful poem called "Let America Be America Again," and it says, "America never was America to me. But this I swear, America will be." This woman has also made that pledge.

I know that her last question as I was leaving the projects was the most important question we must ask. She sat there alone in the projects with her clipboard, writing. She simply looked at me, and she said, "Cory, who will fight with me?"

That is the most important question because we as a society are more interconnected than we ever have been before. Truly what King said, that we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality and tied to a common destiny, is true. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

As this woman fights, this question must resonate within our hearts: Who will fight with her?

The situations I have mentioned above have existed for a long time in inner cities. I conclude with a quote from James Baldwin, who wrote in 1963. In the very last two pages of *The Fire Next Time*, he says, "I know what I'm asking you is impossible. But in today's day and age, as in every age, the impossible is the least we can demand. And one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history and Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible."

I believe that if we are willing to struggle, that if we are willing to join people like Ms. Cooper, that we can make a change in these inner cities, and not just a three-inch change. We can find a way to get to the roof.

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